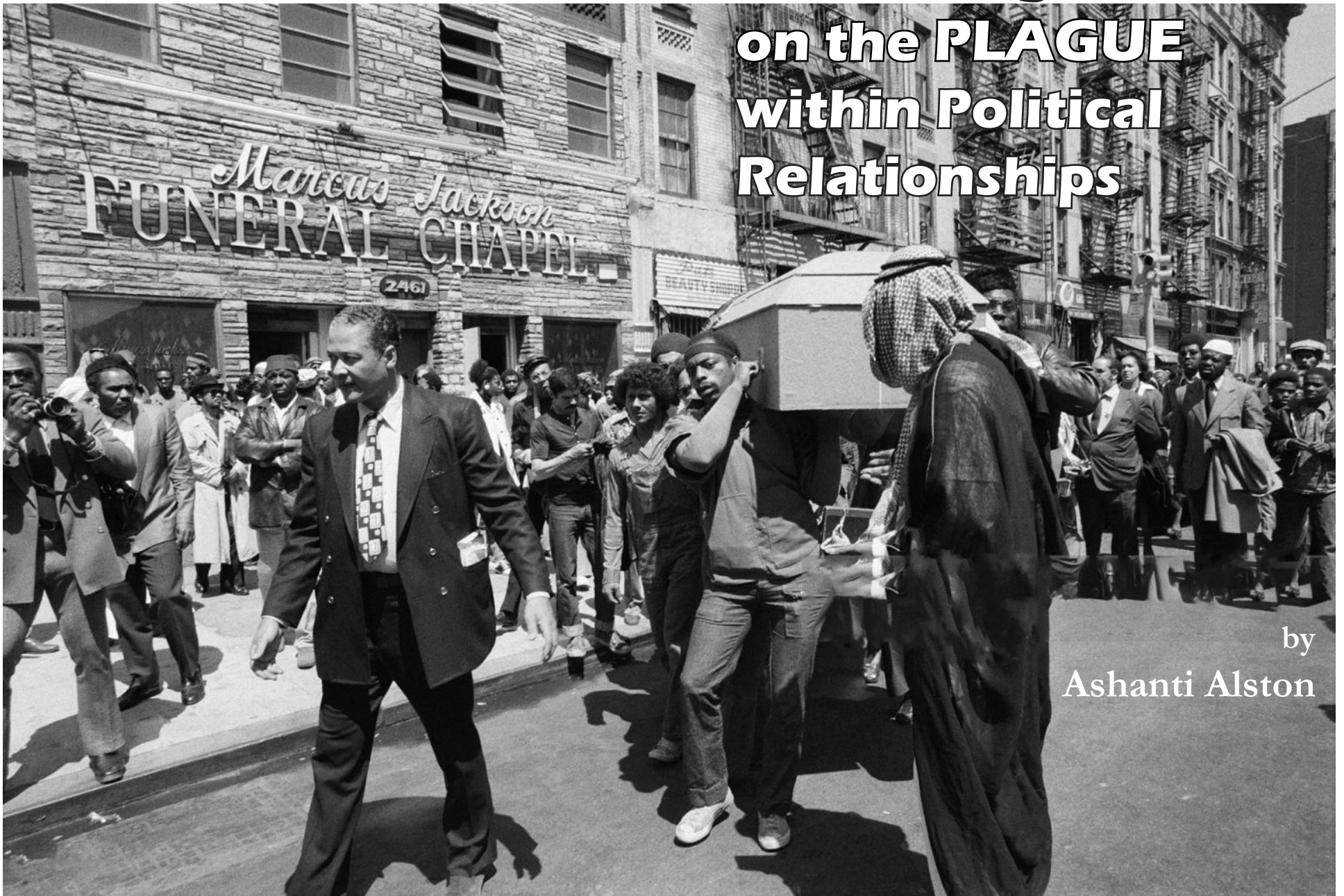


Refocusing on the PLAGUE within Political Relationships



by
Ashanti Alston

supporters, WE STILL have the responsibility to personally develop an example of a genuinely better human being who can live freely, responsibly, powerfully, sensitively, & enjoyably. We're hardly relieved of that.

Our problems now are that whether we're imprisoned or "free," we still breed the sexism, authoritarianism, and rigidity of this System in our personal lives and relationships. That's what's F-ed up about us. That's our "blind-spot" and it makes it very difficult for us to realize the great potential in ourselves and in our relationships, especially our political ones.

Our personal lives & relationships within our political formations are, as a whole, our ACHILLES HEEL, not so much our squabbling politics based on accepting or not accepting this or that political or ideological position.

I hope that this reading raises different, key questions.

—BLA/POW

We need to learn skills in bettering our relationships—personal and political. The two are really one. How can we see revolution as anything different from dialectical twos...two personalities...one personality in & out of a multitude of relationships on a daily basis. Attitudes, emotions, ideas old and new, habits come into play. It is understood that you're joining the Movement or a particular group of it, and that it is going to radically change you as a person. Don't lose that understanding and all that it implies in curing emotional, psychological, dis-ease for emotional, psychological health and power!

We have to redirect our major focus from external to internal enemy. In dialectics, the essence of a movement, group or person, is what's INSIDE. We will need to learn what it takes in intellectual understanding and practical skills to develop ourselves, personally and politically for a lifestyle of meaningful, effective, powerful, and liberating struggle.

THIS IS WHAT I AM LEARNING AND SHARING.

PERSONAL, INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS: AN ACHILLES HEEL

Crucial is how one feels about one's self and one's relationships, both old & new. Can we not say that a revolution is a product of relating to one's self, each other, and life in new, different ways?

Now, I sit back & ask myself how I could ever have imagined the dynamics of a revolution without individuals coming into each other's lives, not only intellectually, but more so, emotionally?

What has always been missing in our groupings were challenges and programs for an individual to tackle the questions of "Who am I? How did I become the way I am? How might I learn to accept the way I am, positive & negative, in order to change myself?"

We have to re-examine what we're doing to ourselves. Regardless of the fact that we are members of the "Army" or the armed struggle

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Cover: Comrades carry the casket of Zayd Malik Shakur, a martyred Black Liberation Army guerrilla, from a Harlem funeral home on May 7, 1973. Shakur was killed on May 2 in a shootout with new jersey state troopers on the turnpike

to their past in order to boost their egos. Yet, no matter how you look at it, when gaps in experience cause problems in being able to effectively and productively work together, then you deal with the attitudes and what have you, that are OBSTACLES to building powerful, working relationships.

In the third example (Skills), we often assume that we have or can easily acquire (after reading a few books) these skills of struggle. Truth of the matter is that few of us have skills and most of us avoid the “act of surrender” necessary to effectively learn new skills. To add another point, most of us think of revolutionary skills as technical skills, as in organizational management, operating equipment such as weapons or printing machinery, etc. But few consider counseling/therapy skills as even “revolutionary.” Few consider “communication” or even listening as a vital skill! As a SKILL at all!!! Yet these areas are more potent in terms of empowering us than any mere ideological training has ever been able to do. They deal directly with YOU as a whole person and your actual relationships (and their outcomes).

Skills are needed in technical areas, yet the most essential skills are in the area of basic human relationships. How can I learn to operate this equipment? Is all well and good. But if I refuse to change my emotionally cold ways with those I work with, what good are the technical skills? Who will I work with? Who will work with me? Why am I cold? How can I change this and become a warm human being who feels good about myself, about what I do, AND, about those who are my comrades?

I recently completed a course in “Counseling Skills” where I learned how to effectively help people to look at themselves, discover themselves in fears, angers, joys, hopes, habits, etc. I learned some skills in just basic “Listening,” and in being a “mirror” for the other person so that they can begin to see a reflection of themselves as they talk. These and other skills have helped me to see how much more can be done to aid us, to help bring out much more within an individual than s/he had thought possible.

...Can the harsh, authoritarian tone of B.T.'s voice scare her back to her former submissive ways, even if she didn't know his "status"?

...Can the knowledge of his status make her choose to submit?

...Can what she's already gained in self-confidence, self-esteem and autonomy give her the inner courage & strength to stand tall in the confrontation?

"It takes two." It takes two people in a relationship; in fact, in a multitude of relationships to realize the more complex nature of each person & each relationship. We should be able to see this clearly just from the examples given here, involving Sex, Experience, Skills, & Personality. This comes when we move our focus of MAJOR concern from the external enemy to the internal one. Though the characters in the examples are fictitious, I have written and devised them with deliberate intent after thinking back on my own experiences and observations. I devised them hoping that people will be able to relate to them "immediately," in the sense of saying, "Yeah, I've experienced that (as victim, perpetrator, or observer)."

In the first example (Sex), there is a need for development and understanding of so-called "Little things" in relation to the concept of attractiveness or beauty, and self-esteem, as well as general sexuality and jealousy. This is not for mere academics. It is pointedly for focusing on what aids or harms our relationships and the potential for these relationships to work for us in powerful, meaningful, creative, and fulfilling ways.

In the second example (Experience), there is a need for a better understanding and introductory orientation to the Struggle, particularly in the requirements, methods, and style of one's particular group or movement. Newcomers and Youth, in general, can be impatient, idealistic or naive, and short on wisdom. The Vets have already been through that "phase" of development and need to invent some creative ways to "share" their wealth of experience in order to be a sort of "mirror" for the others. Old Vets can sometimes give too much weight

I have been preparing myself for a new venture, a kind of sharing outreach, you might say, because that's what I want to do—Share Something Real Special With You. My preparations have been/are in disciplining myself to read, read, read—and test out some new ideas in revolutionary struggle. What I have to share has come to take on a supreme importance for me, as if in answering a "Calling." I give it in that kind of spirit, seriousness and sincerity, too!

There's so much I've learned over the years. In fact, these 10+ years of POW-ment has been a virtual advanced learning course in Life & Struggle. I learned a hell-of-a-lot about movements, political economic theories, organizations, religions, guerrilla theories, etc. But, most of all, I learned and am still learning, one hell-of-a-lot about me. I thank the psychologies for that and the good political friends who helped guide me in that area. This has been the most important, ongoing lesson yet, in my entire life.

In looking back, 10, 15 years ago, with a little bit of honesty about myself and what I observed, I'd have to admit to my ignorances, frustrations, inner conflicts, fears, hurts, and disappointments throughout that whole struggle experience. There were definitely high hopes, promises even, in joining the Black Panther Party, and later, the BLA. But the experience was not one in which those hopes and promises were realized. This, I am sure, has been most all of our experience—in the Party, the Army, or other organization under that liberation category.

Discovering "me" put that era of experience into a new perspective, a meaningful one that I could affirm as "The Truth." For example, when you know that the police on up to the FBI are going to be in your shit to flush you (as an individual, group, or movement) then after you're done cussing them out, threatening them, the only viable locus left to use is a SELF-FOCUS. A simple question: How do I aid or harm my cause, my group goals, my chosen political activity? Or, to put it differently, yet holding to the purpose of the question: How do I aid or frustrate my "enemy," my opposition?

Now, you can answer that with political-economic analysis, position

papers and the like. But more effectively put would be to ask oneself about ONE'S SELF.

The self is formed, shaped by the culture. None of us escapes this. None of us is free from cultural contamination. Cetawayo Tabor, one of the early Panthers, wrote a paper called, "Capitalism plus Dope = Genocide." In it, he calls the dope epidemic—a Plague. Me, more than ten years later, with a lot of basic learning in some psychologies, know now that the Plague was not the dope. It was the state of mind, the emotional, psychological condition of the person, and engulfing masses of people, that was the Plague. I said "was," but it still "is." Cet focused on dope, but I know now that dope is just one of many escapisms that a plagued person gets hooked on.

The dope was a way to "escape" a responsibility to face the emotional, psychological condition of disease or DIS-ease that's a result of daily oppression, daily hurt, and frustration. The responsibility of facing a weakness is the first step to accepting one's own inherent challenge "to heal thyself," as the saying goes. Dope is just one way to be irresponsible. But let me clarify something else. Dope, even here, is nothing and has absolutely no power or influence of its own. It doesn't reach out and twist anyone's arm to use it. It's a personal decision. It is the human or personal misuse and abuse of dope that is the villain. And, in this light, it's on YOU, the individual as decision-maker, who is the focus. There is always the element of free choice. A m/f can't make you do nothing you don't at some point agree to submit to. This is extremely important for us. Consequences, positive/negative come with every choice.

My point here is in choosing to escape from responsibility. In our case, we have the responsibility to answer, in our daily personal & political activities, the question of whether "I" aid or harm my personal, group, or movement progression towards higher ideals or goals. Do I aid or frustrate my "enemy's" goals. We have our escapisms. And, as I say, here—it is the self-focus that's key!

Combine this self-focus and the Plague, redefined as the emotional/

in graphic arts. Though no formal training, Sis. Nubia had learned through "trial & error" how to put together a decent newsletter. It had come to be her "Pride and Joy" since those early days. Bishop, without question, could raise the professional quality & reteach Nubia and others at the same time (better technique/production). But what if Nubia bucked—felt put-down, pushed aside. What if she felt that there was nothing wrong with her way and threatened to quit if Bishop "took over"? Let's say that this is what happened. She was hurt, angered. Her behavior, because she is well known, genuinely liked and attractive—affects others by dampening their spirits and they begin to behave negatively towards Bishop.

PERSONALITY: "B.T." stops over to check out the operation of the Collective. He's considered one of the "heavies" in political direction. Makeda, just a regular volunteer, a bit of a newcomer and unaware of the "status" of B.T., asks him to join in and help out...if he's going to be there. B.T. feels offended. "Sista, I didn't come here to do no damn work and I don't know where you get off giving ME orders. Who're you?!"...Wavering in emotions between anger and fear at his harsh, authoritarian tone, yet wishing to be understood and comradely, she explains, "Brotha, if it sounded like an order, it wasn't. I asked. You're here walking around, observing and I assume you're here to work or at least be open to contribute."..."Well, Sista, that all sounds good (sarcasm) but I'll have you know that my name is B.T. and I'm the COORDINATOR for our whole region in this organization. So, I suggest you do some reading from the Red Book on the relationship between the leadership and the rank-'n-file. I don't need you coming off at me like I'm some buck private in boot camp for the first time."

Two personalities. Different. Let's give B.T. an aggressive, macho, authoritarian personality. Let's give Makeda one of transition from female submissiveness towards a fledgling self-confidence, self-esteem and autonomy (a.k.a. "feminism"). She has that childlike (some say "naive") belief that anything is possible, even human personality change. Yet, it's still new to her and there's still small, lingering uncertainties in her "steps." How will she react/respond to B.T.?

SEX: Sista Nubia is a “good-lookin’” comrade. The male comrades of this newsletter collective are in general attracted to her. They tend to ignore the “less attractive” female comrades by wishing to be “on hand” to help Nubia. The other females pick up the subtle messages. They are hurt, angered—yet, silent. (“Attractiveness” is such a sensitive issue. And one might also add, it is a culturally contaminated one, too.) The atmosphere is not a warm, genuinely comradely one. It seems more like being in a factory or office...sterile! Work without warmth/ The males may or may not be considering the meaning and effects of their behavior on Nubia, on the “shunned ones,” or even on themselves. The shunned ones may not be considering the meaning and effects of their silence, of holding “in” their hurt, anger. Nubia may or may not be considering the meaning and effects of her behavior (especially if she accepts all the “attention”) and the meaning & effects of the others.

EXPERIENCE: Brotha Bishop is a newcomer. He hasn’t been through the turbulent ‘60s–’70s of the Movement...COINTELPRO...internal warfare, birth of the Underground...etc. Sista Leta is an old veteran. Her experience is extensive, dating back to the early SNCC days.

She’s very well-read and pragmatic, and perceptive about people and situations. Bishop volunteered for the work but soon loses interest. He wants to get more into the “thick” of things...The Underground. He’s persistent in wanting to know more and do “higher-level” work. Leta is very familiar with the signs of impatience and maybe a tendency for adventurism. Her attitude/behavior towards him is governed by two principles: The need for security (the need to know) and the need for his development. Her efforts to impress these principles upon him are met with charges of discrimination, favoritism, reverse sexism, etc., as well as Bishop feeling emotions of hurt, anger, envy, disappointment, etc. He may or may not be considering the meaning & effects of his behavior, nor the meaning & purpose of Leta’s. And vice versa, she may not be aware of how she conveys the principles involved here, to him.

SKILLS: Bro. Bishop has had professional training and work experience

psychological dis-ease we’re infected with as a result of upbringing in this society. Ask yourself, if dope is one of many escapisms, then what are others? What are mine? And ask not for mere intellectual gymnastics, but ask for real, genuine, practical, helpful reasons.

I believe, as with dope, that the materials of escapisms have this in Common: In and of themselves the materials and techniques of escapism have not power or influence. It is in how we think about them, what significance we give them, and ultimately, how we choose to use/abuse them. Escapism implies, obviously, misuse & abuse.

In this sense, damn-near anything can be used to “escape” from some really unacceptable reality, or from some really necessary, vital personal, political responsibility. Dope, alcohol, thrill-seeking, partying, street life, home life, sex, religion, guilt-tripping, ego-tripping, machismo, etc., and to make this even more controversial—REVOLUTION! But that’s another subject in itself. (Patience)

You feed the Plague with escapisms. You get rid of it by courageously pursuing such questions of daily life as: Who am I? What’s missing in my life? What am I really doing for myself—my cause? What do I really want from Life, from my comrades—from my movement?

You pursue these plague-fighting questions at any, and at best, all times. But particularly when you have decided to become a revolutionary involving yourself with the most dangerous groups in the country. More than at any other time in your life, and more than at any other HISTORICAL TIME, you have a great responsibility to “know thyself” and the things about you that harm you, your associates, lovers, family, your whole cause.

Lets go through a hypothetical exercise: WE ALL ACCEPT THE “TRUTH.” THAT THE ENEMY, IN THE FORM OF THE POLICE, FBI, ETC., ARE GOING TO BE IN OUR SHIT, BECAUSE THAT IS THEIR J-O-B. NOW PUT THE ABOVE ENEMY OFF TO THE SIDE, NOT NECESSARILY OUT OF VIEW, BUT NOT IN THE CENTER OF OUR FOCUS FOR THE TIME BEING.

WHAT'S LEFT? YOU KNOW THEIR COMMITMENT, THEIR DETERMINATION, THEIR HISTORY. WHAT'S LEFT? JUST US REVOLUTIONARIES, RIGHT?

CENTER OF FOCUS: US.

“It isn’t always others who enslave us. Sometimes we let circumstances enslave us; sometimes we let routine enslave us; sometimes we let things enslave us; sometimes, with weak wills, we enslave ourselves.”
(Richard Evans)

We came together in the ‘60s–’70s era. We’re still coming to-ge-ther. Yet, that “true togetherness” eludes us. Why? Now remember: Keep the Police and Company OUT of the picture! Because, to keep them out means that we have to look, take a hard look...at us...i.e. being respon-sible. Now—

Think about your experiences in the movement, past and present, as Panthers, BLA, or other liberation group. Think about them. What were they like? What were your motives for joining? What were the personal relationships like? Were there jealousies, games, sexism, all-chiefs-and-no-indians, intellectual headgames? The abuse and misuse of “free love,” the ego-tripping, the pressures for aggressiveness, the con games, the personal attacks...and need I go on?

The examples that you’ll give are indicative of what we do to each other...

...to hold us back

...to frustrate our own efforts

...to kill, literally, our own spirits.

These things you can’t blame on “The White Man,” the “System”—none of that ESCAPISM! These are the results of internalized oppression, the cultural contamination that’s the Plague.

We all joined the movement because that Plague made our lives so miserable. It made us feel so dog-gone powerless, and we didn’t like that kind of feeling, that kind of existence. Yet, the mere act of joining and participating in a movement doesn’t rid us of that Plague. Reading Marxism, the Holy Qur’an, Carlos Marighella, Malcolm, etc., might well enrich our intellect, but they don’t change the sexism, the jealousies, the games. Being escape-artists we only took from those books what didn’t make us face our emotional, psychological diseased selves...the selves that count in two people WORKING together. Let’s talk about two people working together.

“IT TAKES TWO”

“It takes two”—that’s a dialectical law. The struggle for liberation is a colossal and complex relationship of TWOs, between two people. Obviously, we’re talking basic everyday relationships, and also, everyday WORKING relationships amongst “us-folks.” But these relationships don’t just happen. You have to work towards the kind of powerful, liberating life-affirming relationships we need. This requires an understanding of what makes relationship work, and vice versa—what prevents it/them from working.

Example: WE’RE GOING TO PUT OUT A NEWSLETTER. WHERE DO WE BEGIN? ACCEPTING THE WHYs OF A NEWSLETTER, AS A CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING ORGAN, LET’S MOVE DIRECTLY INTO THE FOLLOWING...

Who’s interested (in the newsletter work)? Let’s say 5–10 people come forward to volunteer their time & energy. Let’s also assume that it’s a mixed group in terms of Sex, Experience, Skills, and Personality. Now, with just this, I will give you some variables in terms of possible (and historically, “probable”) problems, that can/will arise.

AGAIN, AS A REMINDER—PUT ASIDE THAT “EXTERNAL ENEMY” WHOSE JOB IT IS TO PUT A STOP TO YOUR ACTIVITIES.